

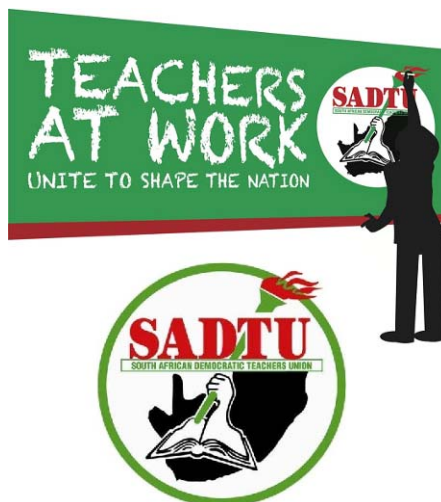


Sharpeville, 21 March, 1960

21st March: Sharpeville Day

Also called Human Rights Day

A resource-book for educators



Part 1

History and Tactics: A Summary

The Second World War ended in 1945, fifteen years before the Sharpeville Massacre of 21 March, 1960.



Red Army raises the Soviet flag over the Berlin Reichstag, 1945

In that year only two of what are now approximately 60 African countries were independent, and even these two (Ethiopia and Liberia) were weak and dominated by outsiders. All the rest were “colonies” of European powers, mostly ruled from overseas. The anti-colonial struggle was a continental struggle.

Some Dates of Independence:

Libya, 1946	17 countries, 1960	Kenya, 1963	Guinea Bissau, 1973
Egypt, 1952	Tanganyika, 1961	Malawi, Zambia, 1964	Mozambique, 1975
Morocco, Sudan, 1956	Uganda, 1962	Botswana, 1966	Angola, 1975
Ghana, 1957	Algeria, 1962	Lesotho, Swaziland, 1968	Zimbabwe, 1980

South Africa, too, was a colony, although its ruling power was internal, consisting of its white minority. South Africa’s anti-Imperialist struggle was then, and still is part of Africa’s on-going, continental struggle for freedom and dignity.

First World War

Thirty-one years before the Soviet victory of 1945, the First World War had broken out between European, North American and Japanese powers who believed that they all had a “right” to own colonies. The First World War did not conclude the matter, but it resulted in the destruction of one of the great powers – Russia – and its replacement by a new, anti-colonial revolutionary force, the Soviet Union. The birth of the Soviet Union caused a new phase of anti-colonial struggle in Asia that developed strongly between the 1920s and the 1940s, for example in China and India.

Decolonisation followed victory over the fascists

During the Second World War between the Imperial powers, fascist Germany attacked the Soviet Union. The Red Army fought back and defeated the fascists. The victory made open colonialism of the old kind difficult to sustain. China and India broke free.

The decolonisation of Africa proceeded with the independence of the former Italian colony of Libya in 1946, continuing at a steady pace through the 1970s. By the end of the year of Sharpeville, 1960, more than half of Africa was politically independent. The Organisation of African Unity was established by the independent countries in 1963.

In 1946 in South Africa the great, hundred-thousand-strong African Mineworkers’ Strike began a series of struggles, using a variety of tactics, which led up to the crisis year of 1960.

From the African Miners’ Strike of 1946, Led by J B Marks, through the Three Doctors’ Pact; the events of May Day, 1950, the Defiance Campaign of 1952; the Women’s Charter of 1954; The Congress of the People of 1955; The Treason Trial and the £1-a-Day Stay-away and Anti-Pass Campaign of the late 1950s, each major episode follows the one before in a consequent and rational way.

The apartheid regime reacted. There were setbacks. These included the banning of the Communist Party of South Africa in 1950, the Sharpeville Massacre (followed by the banning of the ANC and the PAC) in 1960, and the Rivonia arrests of 1963. These enemy actions caused major disruption to the liberation movement. The liberation movement had to regroup and adopt new tactics.

The ANC-led alliance was able to do so, successfully, through the founding of Umkhonto we Sizwe and the commencement of armed struggle; through education, organisation and diplomacy in exile; through clandestine organisation, unity-in-action and self-legalisation inside the country; until the unbanning of 1990, the democratic breakthrough of 1994, and the on-going realisation of the goals of the Freedom Charter through the National Democratic Revolution (NDR) and the National Development Plan (NDP). The struggle continues.

Part 2

Tactics of the 1950s

In the late 1940s, the rise of the ANC Youth League ended the ANC presidency of the great Dr A B Xuma, and came soon after the election by the white minority of the National Party government of D F Malan and the introduction of full-on apartheid.

Dr Xuma had presided over organizational renewal of the ANC, the creation of the Youth League, the creation of the ANC Women's League. His tenure saw the production of the "African Claims in South Africa", which became the basis of the ANC Programme of Action of 1949, promoted by the new leaders from the Youth League, including Walter Sisulu, Oliver Tambo, and Nelson Mandela.



1946 Miners' Strike

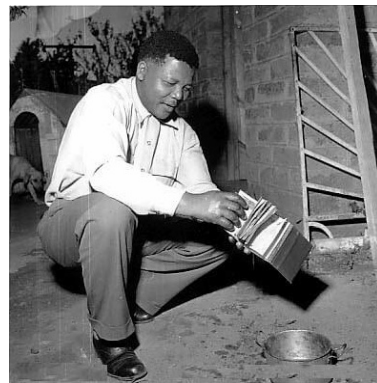


1947 Three Doctors' Pact

The change of ANC leadership coincided with the banning of the Communist Party of South Africa in 1950. The whole set of circumstances led to a series of new tactics: stay-away, defiance, boycott, Congress of the People, Freedom Charter, and more.



1950 protest meeting

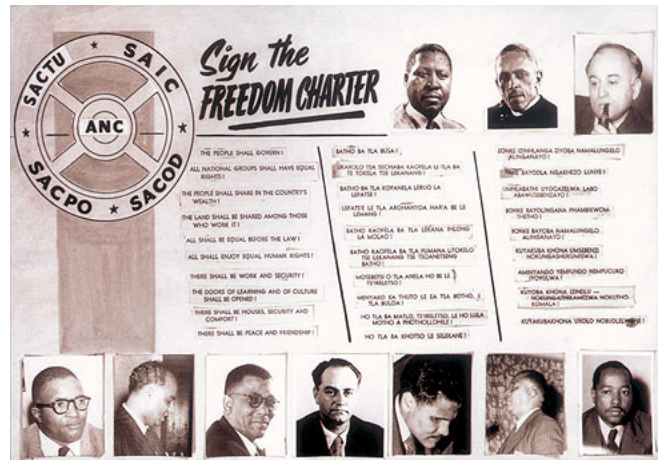


Nelson Mandela burning his pass book

The liberation movement sought tactics that would advantage the masses while denying the regime the opportunity to smash the people's struggles. The African Miners' strike of 1946 had changed the nature of the workers' movement in South African forever. It also drew international solidarity from as far away as the United Nations in New York. But it had been smashed by force. The Three Doctors' Pact of 1947 had established the principle of non-racialist alliance that led to greater things in 1954 and 1955. But it was countered by the violent Durban race riots of 1949.



FedSAW and Women's Charter, 1954



Freedom Charter, 1955

The tactic of the stay-away was a modification of strike tactics. Instead of picketing and marching, workers stayed indoors, where they were relatively safe from violent retaliation. The legal direct-action tactic of boycotting transport and consumer goods was similarly designed to protect the masses, while still being effective.



Kotane, Mandela, Treason Trial, 1956



Women's March, Union Buildings, August 9th, 1956

The tactic of non-violent defiance of unjust laws was adopted with similar intentions, but it was also dropped at times, when its effects fell too harshly on the people.



Alexandra Bus Boycott, 1957

The tactic of mass education, consultation, organisation and mobilisation was the best. The Freedom Charter, passed at the Congress of the People, is a model of democracy that has never been forgotten in South Africa and the whole world.



Stay-At-Home, 1958

Like the upheaval of the late 1940s, the internal struggles towards the end of the 1950s had contradictory results. One of the consequences was the massacre of the people who had been summoned by the PAC at Sharpeville and at Langa.



Cato Manor, 1959

The terrible loss of life at Sharpeville, was only part of the set-back. Thousands were locked up for months in the State of Emergency, emerging to a South Africa in which "Congress" was devastated, and illegal.

But as in 1950, the movement was able to go forward in a new, and eventually more effective, way.

Part 3

The ANC and the PAC

Writing on 1 September 1959, six months before the Sharpeville Massacre of 21 March 1960, Walter Sisulu wrote:

"In recent months much has been published in the South African press about the 'Africanists' and their attempt to capture the leadership of the African National Congress. The struggle reached a climax at the Transvaal Provincial Conference of the A.N.C., held under the auspices of the National Executive on the 1st and 2nd November, 1958. The Africanists attempted to 'pack' the conference, but most of their supporters failed to qualify as delegates. They then tried to break up the conference by force, and, when this attempt was defeated, they withdrew, announcing that they were leaving Congress and intended forming a new organisation.

Sisulu explained that the dispute had begun when a National Workers' Conference of March, 1958 had resolved to organise a 3-day stayaway against the whites-only general election of April, 1958, and for a demand for a minimum wage of £1 per day. Two ANC "Africanists", Madzunya and Leballo, campaigned publicly against the stayaway. For this they were expelled from the ANC. The last stand of these sectarians was the meeting described above. The PAC launched in April, 1959.

The ANC national conference of December 1959 decided on new action against the pass laws, with the mass burning of passes all over the country on a series of dates. The first date was to be March 31, 1960. The ANC worked steadily towards that target in the ensuing months. Only on March 18 did Robert Sobukwe announce that the PAC campaign would start on March 21, with a call to the African people to leave their passes at home and surrender themselves for arrest at the nearest police station.

March 21 was chosen so as to up-stage the ANC. The PAC's demand for a minimum monthly wage of £35 was likewise an attempt to steal the long-standing Congress Alliance campaign for £1 a day. The PAC founding conference also adopted the ANC anthem "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika", the ANC's slogan "Mayibuye" and the colours of the ANC flag (though not the design) as its own. The PAC was in practice a copy-cat organisation - one of many down the years that have tried to steal the ANC's identity. In the PAC case, the result was tragic.

The events of Monday, March 21, showed the Pan-Africanists to be a strong force in only two areas, in parts of Cape Town, and in the Sharpeville-Evaton-Vereeniging complex. In all other centres the PAC's campaign elicited practically no response. In Johannesburg, Sobukwe's stronghold, only 200 people surrendered themselves for arrest; in Durban 12, in Port Elizabeth none.

The ANC in the late 1950s was large in membership, popular, well organised, and well prepared for struggle, approaching the 50th Anniversary of its founding.

The massacres of Sharpeville and Langa on Monday, 21 March 1960 were at gatherings called by the Pan-Africanist Congress, and not by the African National Congress. It was done by people whose origin was in the ANC, but who wanted to claim the legitimacy of the larger and much older mother body, for themselves alone. This contest within the ranks of the oppressed masses exposed the general movement and its ordinary followers to danger. The massacre followed.

The PAC did not shoot anybody on that day. It was the apartheid police who did the killing. But the question as to whether the massacre would have happened if the PAC had not broken ranks, and tried to steal the ANC's show, is still an open one. In considering this question, it would be a mistake to ignore the broader question of what tactics were appropriate, or wise.

In practice this was always a problem for the liberation movement. The question being: To what extent should the masses be led into harm's way? How much suffering should the masses be asked to bear? The Defiance Campaign of the early 1950s – a campaign against the pass laws - had been called off for the reason that the regime was punishing the ordinary people too hard for it. It was replaced by the campaign for the Freedom Charter. The "Satyagraha" (non-violent protest) campaign led by Thambi Naidoo and M K Gandhi prior to the First World War was also eventually called off for the same reason. In April, 1958 the planned 3-day stay-at-home had been called off after one day by the ANC leadership (without consulting SACTU).

The decision as to what action to undertake always weighed heavily upon the leadership. Yet the plan of the ANC for 31 March 1960 was a provocative one. Leaders and members were to burn their passes in public. This did happen to an extent. The ANC's first response to the Sharpeville massacre was to call a day of mourning on the 28th, and public pass-book-burnings happened on that day.

In the end, the blame for the slaughter at Sharpeville lies with the brutal colonial apartheid regime, and not with the people who challenged the regime.

In Mueda, Mozambique, less than three months later, the Portuguese colonialists shot and killed more than 500 black people who had gathered in the town to petition the Portuguese governor of the province. This was on 16 June, 1960. It motivated the FRELIMO armed struggle that removed the Portuguese rulers, 15 years later, in 1975.

Part 4

The Massacre

Sharpeville is a township, or location, situated in between the then new industrial city of Vanderbijlpark, and the older city of Vereeniging close by, about 75 kilometres south of Johannesburg. Both Sharpeville and Vanderbijlpark had been started in the 1940s, i.e. less than 20 years prior to the massacre. Sharpeville existed as a labour reserve for the steel-based economy of Vanderbijlpark.



This was one of only two places in the whole country that the PAC had a relatively big response to its late, short-notice call to come out on the 21st of March, 1960. The other one was Langa, near Cape Town.



The PAC's campaign was designed differently to the ANC's in some respects. The PAC did not advise the people to burn their passes, but only to leave them at home and then to go *en masse* to the police stations to court arrest for not carrying their passes. Perhaps this was supposed to be less confrontational than the ANC's agreed tactic of people collectively burning their pass books in public.



In practice, when the large crowd grew outside the police station in Sharpeville, the police opened fire.



The story of the massacre is not complicated. Journalists were there to witness it, and to take photographs.



The people came, and the police shot, and continued to shoot while the people were running away. Most of the victims were shot in the back. 69 died. Many more were wounded. In Langa, two more were shot dead by police.



Part 5

Ban, Exile

After the Sharpeville Massacre, the bodies were buried.



The ANC called for a day of mourning on the 28th of March, 1960 in the form of a nation-wide strike and protest of the Sharpeville Massacre. Pass books are burned in countless bonfires. At one of the events the ANC President, Chief Albert Luthuli, publicly burned his pass.



Oliver Tambo left the country under instructions to organise solidarity for the ANC overseas.

On the 30th of March, 1960, the white minority government declared a State of Emergency which lasted until 26 August of that year. Over 2000 arrests were made.



On 7 April an “Unlawful Organisations Act” was brought into force by the racist regime.

On 8 April 1960 the ANC and the PAC were banned under the new “Unlawful Organisations Act”.



On the 1st of April 1960, the U N Security Council passed a resolution (Number 134) condemning the Sharpeville Massacre and instructing the Secretary-General, Dag Hammerskjöld, to speak to the South African government and report back.

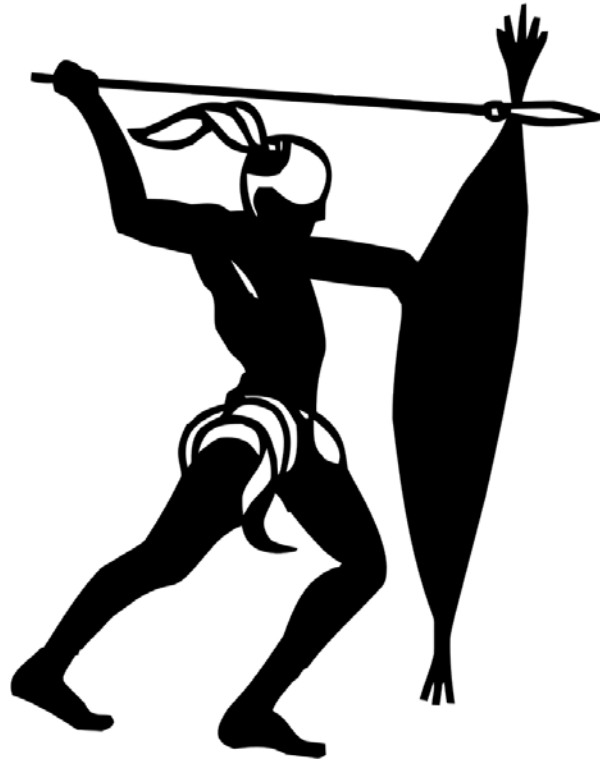


The British solidarity organisation, founded in 1959 and known as the “Boycott Movement” changed its name to the “Anti-Apartheid Movement” and took on a bigger role.



Part 6

MK, SAUF, Morogoro and Education



At the beginning of 1961, the decision was taken to launch Umkhonto we Sizwe. It made itself public on 16 December 1961 with sabotage action on power lines.

In 1961, the Commonwealth expelled South Africa. The United Nations took longer. It only suspended South Africa in 1974.

The ANC tried to form a “South African United Front” (SAUF) in exile, that included the PAC, but it broke down. The PAC continued to exist, supported by sympathisers, but it never mounted another event like Sharpeville.

By the time it was banned in 1960, the ANC had become a very large and well-organised nationwide structure, nearly 50 years old. The PAC was less than one year old. It never launched a sustained challenge. It eventually fragmented and dwindled to almost nothing.

In 1960 the ANC lost a lot. It was devastated. But unlike the PAC, the ANC proved able to rebuild and to open many different fronts.

In 1969 the ANC held a conference in Morogoro, Tanzania, and adopted the document known as “Strategy and Tactics”. In the 1970s, the ANC established a school in Morogoro, called the Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College.

The ANC recovered its legal position thirty years after Sharpeville, in 1990. In 1994 the ANC won the first universal-franchise election with more than 60% of the vote.

Talking point

Why is Sharpeville Day officially celebrated as Human Rights Day?

What was at stake on the day was freedom, and what was being worked out in those days were the tactics to gain freedom.

The struggle was to organise and to assert People's Power.

Rights are passive, but freedom is active. "Rights", and "Freedom", are not the same thing.

Rights are the end of struggle, where struggle has been institutionalized in the state.

Rights are administered, or delivered, by a higher power, but Freedom does for itself.

The Sharpeville story is not really a "Rights" story.

The freedom struggle continues, in South Africa and internationally.
